

New EPA Soot Limits Faulted by Scientists

- By JOHN HEILPRIN, Associated Press Writer
Friday, February 3, 2006

WASHINGTON, (AP) --

The Environmental Protection Agency's proposed regulations on soot were criticized Friday as too weak by scientists advising the agency and as too politicized by health advocates and Democrats.

Rogene Henderson, a biochemist and toxicologist who chaired the EPA advisory panel, and Dr. Frank Speizer, a Harvard University professor and panel member, said in a telephone conference that the science supports tougher standards than EPA chose.

Henderson said the panel's continuing protest of that decision puts it in "uncharted waters" opposing EPA.

Other air pollution experts and advocates complained of last-minute tinkering by the White House Office of Management and Budget. Bart Ostro, chief of California EPA's air pollution epidemiology unit, said OMB officials circumvented a scientific peer-review process.

Deborah Shprentz of the American Lung Association said OMB distorted the way in which EPA staff scientists and the review panel's experts interpreted key studies.

OMB spokesman Alex Conant said the White House office reviews rules as part of the routine regulatory process but added, "The ultimate decision on rulemaking rests with the individual agencies."

Separately, Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., and eight Democratic colleagues sent a letter Friday to EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson saying EPA held improper secret meetings and should have chosen tougher health-based limits on soot because they are the cornerstone of the Clean Air Act.

"The level of the standards proposed by EPA will leave millions of Americans unprotected," the senators wrote. "Playing politics with public health is unconscionable."

The proposed standards deal with fine pollution particles smaller than 2.5 micrometers — one-30th the diameter of a human hair — which lodge in people's lungs and blood vessels. The EPA said in 1997 that cutting fine-particle pollution would save 15,000 people a year from premature deaths due to heart and lung diseases aggravated by soot-filled air.

EPA officials said the review was run appropriately and smoothly, and that Johnson simply was unconvinced there was evidence to support a more stringent standard.

Bill Wehrum, EPA's acting assistant administrator for air and radiation, told the advisory panel Friday that the agency "places great importance on your role."

Johnson said in December that his decision was based on "the best science available." An EPA staff paper said it would result in 22 percent fewer premature deaths in nine cities.

EPA proposed in December cutting by roughly half the allowable particulate emissions from smokestacks and tailpipes. The advisory panel said they should be cut slightly more.